The pugs don't work

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

If I parroted "D-d-d-d-d-don't shoot! ... You're busted!" in two distinct voices, flinging my arms up in submission, then making the double 'finger and thumb gun', I expect you'd know exactly which game I was alluding to. If there was any doubt at all I could freak out and shout, "Aw, naw, naw, naw, the Narcs man!" and pump a barrage of hypodermic needles into the ether, aimed at an imaginary drug enforcement Power Ranger.

Narc - the arcade coin-op featuring an early example of digitised graphics - was bound to cause a stir upon its release in 1988, if only because the main man behind it was none other than Eugene Jarvis (who gets a name-check in-game, credits aside). Yes, the same gaming dignitary previously responsible for gifting us Defender and Robotron: 2084 on behalf of Williams Electronics.

That aside, released four years prior to Mortal Kombat, it was considered one of the earliest 'video game nasties' on a number of levels. At its core the focus is drugs and your eradication of them. All well and good for a couple of slick American cops patrolling a violent neighbourhood you might imagine, except the way Max Force and Hit Man go about it is perhaps a tad overzealous and, erm, *illegal*.

> "NARC - now you have a chance to infiltrate the MR BIG CORPORATION, the scourge of the underworld. Outwit the army of body guards, gangs of charisma-bypass patients in trench coats, the bullet-brain with the build of a rhinoceros and the breath of a dung beetle, packs of vicious canine yappies, the psychotic clown with the evil sense of humour - you'll die, but not laughing!
>
> But it's not all bad! You've got a mean shiny street machine, some heavy metal hardware and pretty neat

moves. Hit the enemy - and, finally, come up against the baddest, the biggest - Mr Big!"

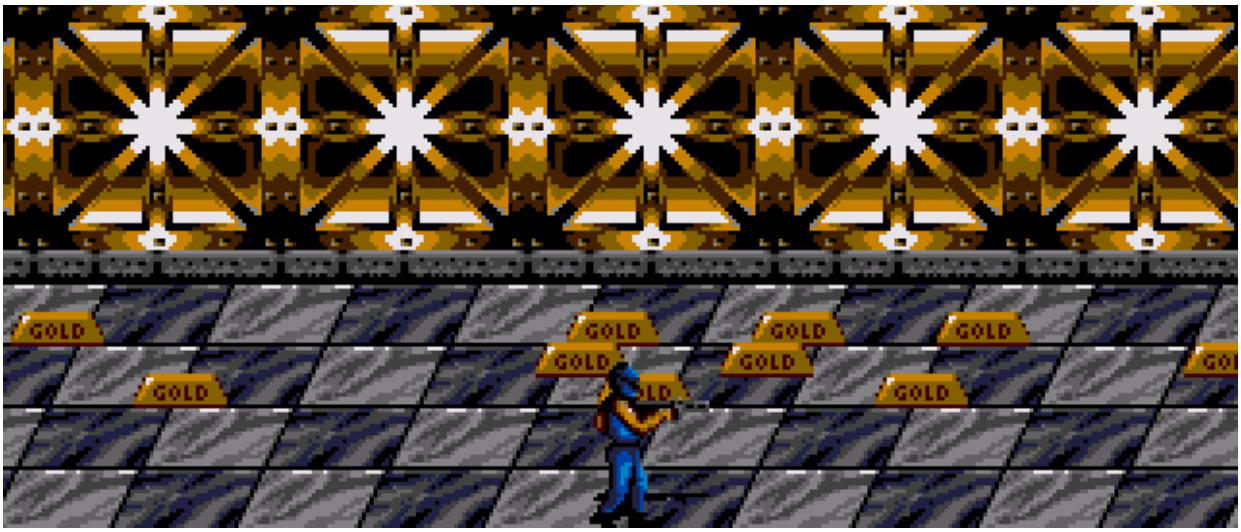
Playing as Max Force in single-player mode, or collaborating with your partner, Hit Man, if you subscribe to the Rent a Friend (TM) service, you tackle the problem by obliterating

everything that moves with either an automatic machine gun or a missile launcher. While it's entirely possible to arrest the drug-pushing/imbibing crooks for extra points (just by nudging into them a bit), it's much less risky and supremely more fun to blow them to smithereens, appraising your handiwork with glee as their various appendages head south... and north, and east and west, in a gory miasma of pulsating human agony.

I single out their *human* attributes because in contrast their canine pets are treated very differently. Despite them being more of a threat than their handlers, bizarrely, shooting dogs only results in their puppyfication; they shrink to a quarter of the size and scurry away for cover. Clearly Williams thought we'd have the stomach for human dismemberment, yet drew the line at animal abuse. I know lots of dogs who are far more decent, upstanding members of society than their human companions so that seems perfectly reasonable to me.

And there's more; Narc's controversy extended to the inclusion of street-walking prostitutes, adult book stores and movie theatres, a not so flattering portrayal of the disabled and the theft (or confiscation?) of Mr Big's ill-gotten gold reserves. Oh, and let's not forget all the wanton jaywalking!

Us Brits don't really have a word for this as it's not specifically a crime in itself.



In the midst of all this shock-jockery you have to wonder if the FBI's "winners don't use drugs" admonition made any impact at all on the kids playing the game. Perhaps it recruited a few extra narcotics squad officers into the fold... who were very disappointed to realise that you generally have to deal with the drugs dilemma through the judicial system, debating reams of stodgy evidence for and against conviction, rather than indiscriminately opening fire on anyone who looks a bit suspicious. Insert your own Donald Trump joke here if you like.

Regardless of the controversy, well, more likely as a *consequence* of it, Ocean in 1990 acquired the license to port Narc to all the popular home computer formats of the time. Random Access/The Sales Curve were given the green light to commence its development, although - with the exception of Ned Langman - the same team who brought us revered titles such as SWIV, Silkworm and Rodland sadly *weren't* involved. The crew comprised coders Greg Michael and Steve Snake (who also contributed to the music), graphicians Ned Langman, Robert Whitaker and Shaun McClure, and musician, Tony Williams.

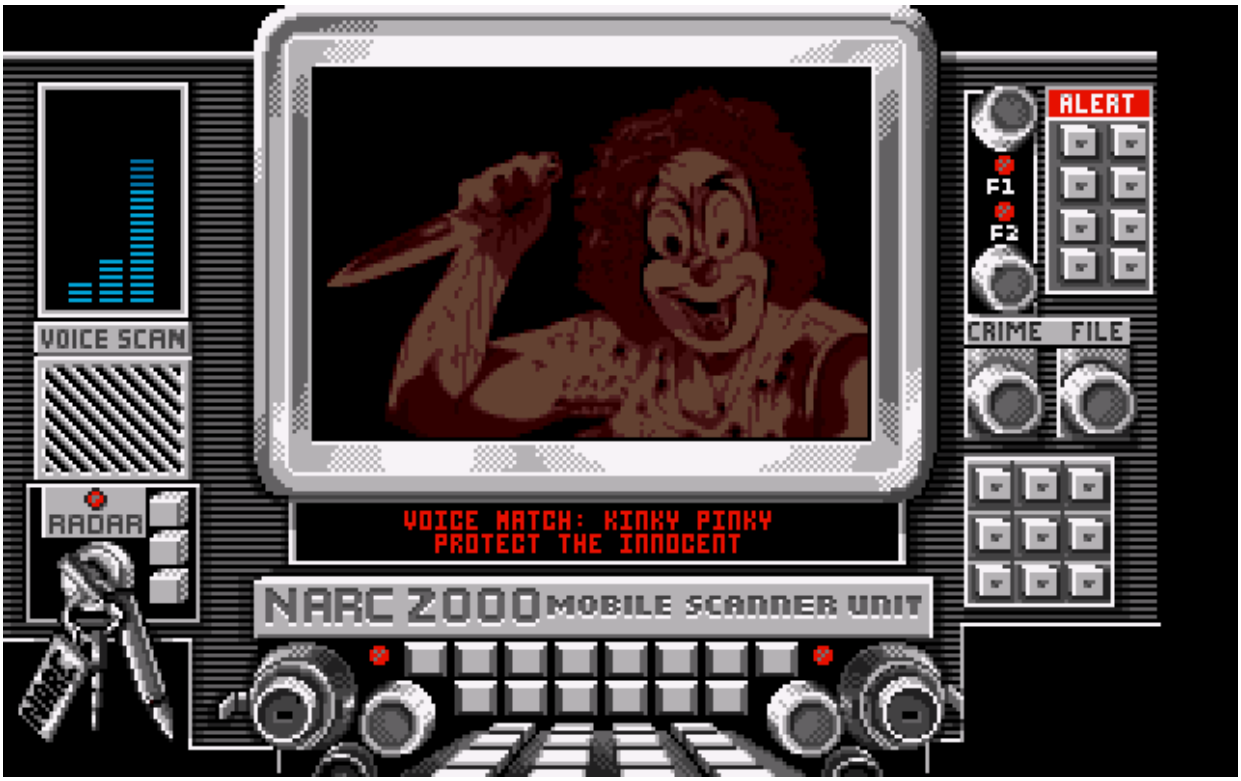
In the same year, Acclaim Entertainment published a handheld LCD iteration, along with a port for the NES, developed by Williams themselves. Whilst adopting the anti-drugs stance of the original (proudly stated in the manual) - and even donating $25,000 to the 'Just Say No' campaign - Acclaim arranged for most of the references to illicit substances (and any other dubious elements) to be toned down or omitted altogether to comply with Nintendo's censorship stipulations.

> "We at Acclaim are pleased to present NARC, the first video game for the Nintendo Entertainment System (R) with a strong anti-drug message.
>
> NARC takes gamers through the supreme, larger-than-life war on drugs with exciting, colorful characters such as Max Force, who wages 'justice' against a number of sordid enemies. And although the fast-paced action in NARC is sometimes extreme, it conveys what may often be harsh realities of the drug environment. Nevertheless,

> it is a fictitious representation of how the battle against drugs may be won.
>
> We hope you'll realize, as we do, that it is only through concern, strong efforts and education that substance abuse in young adults can be prevented. That is why Acclaim has become a sponsor of Just Say No International. This non-profit organization with more than 15,000 clubs nationwide has members who are kids and young adults like you, and is dedicated to providing other kids and young adults with the information and support needed to say 'no' to harmful drugs of all kinds.
>
> Playing NARC is one way to express a stand against drugs. The real test, however, is in your actions. So, spread the word that doing drugs is no longer 'cool', and join Acclaim, Max Force and Just Say No International, in working to become the drug-free generation."

Why is it 'Narc' is always capitalised, even on the original cabinet? It's not an acronym. What's more strange is the seemingly haphazard way Acclaim went about sanitising the hard-hitting, no holds barred game. For instance, Spike Rush's hypodermic needle projectile weapons remained, yet the blood splatter seen on the game's flyer was re-coloured yellow, suggesting that the NES incarnation has warped into a paintballing romp of some kind. In-game blood is absent too, as is smoking, some of the signage concerning sex and nudity (what, no 'Hole in Juan'?), the cannabis nursery, the drugs lab, references to PCP etc., and the gore and guts finale, which was substituted for a scene depicting flying bone fragments. Funniest of all, Mr Big's 'K.R.A.K.' underground crime syndicate is now the 'K.W.A.K. Corporation'. He's diversified into trading in prohibited, bootleg rubber duck bath toys all of a sudden?

Sharing a similar fate were the home computer ports, although not to the same extent. Notwithstanding the absence of most of the lewd signage in the Amiga version, the adult movie/book stores and Kinky Pinky's 'all nude' cinema *were* reproduced. In the subway area we can see a travel poster advertising Florida as a holiday destination that didn't appear in the arcade coin-op at all, and doesn't replace anything contentious. 'K.R.A.K', 'Bud's Bus' nursery and any other drug-related paraphernalia got a pass, along with the killable prostitutes (referred to as 'female escorts' in the manual). At a stretch you *could* explain away the latter as suggestive women in tight tops and short skirts thrusting their assets at you with one hand behind their head and the other on a hip. All totally innocent and censor-proof I'm sure.



On the Amiga, the poorly implemented controls were of greater concern, and largely explain some of the terrible review scores Narc received (the lowest being 7% courtesy of Amiga Action, September 1992, closely followed by Amiga Power's 17%, October 1992). Because tapping down quickly instigates a crouch, and conversely, swiftly tapping up instructs your sprite to jump, you often find yourself jumping when you only wish to move up the screen, or crouching when you really want to head downwards. Anyone watching who's unfamiliar with the game would be forgiven for thinking the duo are suffering from Parkinson's disease! Even so, thanks to good marketing and notoriety of the game, Narc entered the Gallop sales charts at number 16 (Computer & Video Games, March 1991).

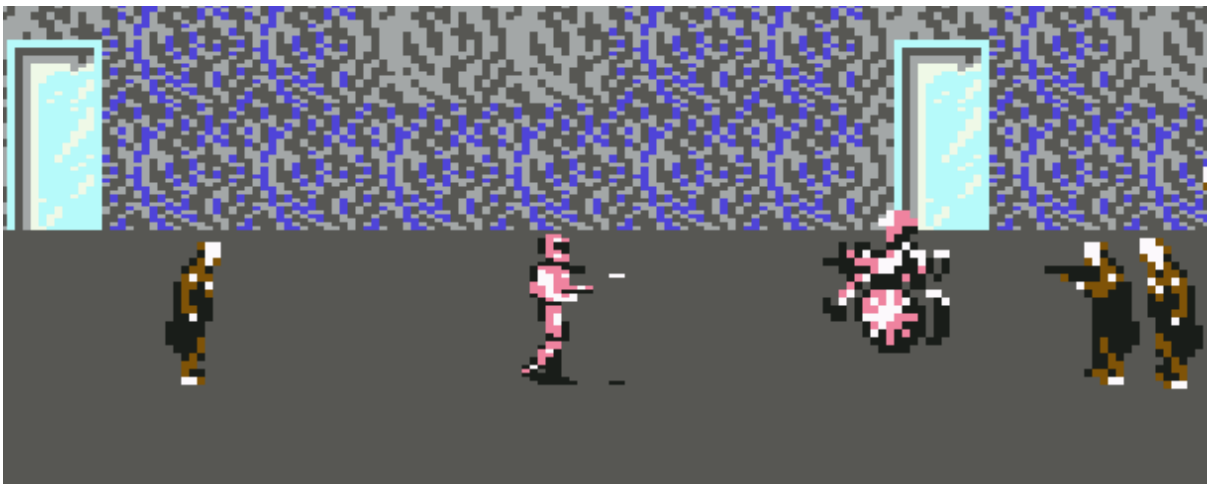
Analogously, shaking off Mr Big's vicious attack dogs is equally painful, in more ways than you'd expect. They can only be killed when you're crouching, yet whenever they take a chunk out of your ankles, you're forced to stand upright. If you have any suggestions as to how to work around that brain-teaser while you're being mauled by a dozen of the savages, I'm all ears... thanks to the biker helmet, otherwise, they'd have been bitten off. This is made all the more frustrating due to the curmudgeonly, unresponsive controls, languid gameplay and jerky scrolling.

Otherwise, most of the key attributes of the original are present and correct including the swooping, armed 'Narcotics Opposition' helicopter backup. You collect differently coloured 'safe cards' to exit certain areas, and altogether there are twelve levels and four sub-stages to tackle. These entail stomping through run-down streets, a swamp, kennels, 'Kinky Pinky's Big Top', a junkyard, subway, chemical refinery, and across a bridge where you confront druggy, Joe Rockhead, who can only be nuked rather than arrested... presumably because rehabilitation hasn't been invented yet.

Many of your opponents are carbon copies so you'll be confronted by hoards of dodgy flasher types wearing ankle-length trench coats, knife-wielding psycho Kinky Pinky clowns, cowboys, and Rambo impersonators. Even the king-sized flying bugs were ported, though you do have to wonder what the deal with those was in the first place.

Your machine gun is of the rapid-fire variety until your ammo count depletes to one. Then that final bullet lasts forever, only a single shot at a time. Limited ammo missiles are your other option, activated by holding down the fire button for a few seconds. Even the Porsche 911 in which you rock up to the mission, 360-ing to a skidding halt, is considered a weapon - it'll spin on a dime to face the opposite way, and can be used to mow down crowds of 'Sunset Strip' street scum, instantly turning them into mincemeat. Even so, being a delicate, pretty sports car you'll need to steer around fender-mutilating dumpsters and land mines if you want to preserve it for the carnival. Other less impressive vehicles are also available to commandeer with a flash of your badge. We do have those, don't we? I mean we're proper, bonafide cops and not just vigilantes playing judge, jury and executioner?

As in the arcade game, Mr Big turns out to be a handicapped guy in a wheelchair, much like Belger from Final Fight, which followed a year later. When defeated he pops out of his chair and crawls off on all-fours. So was he only pretending to be paraplegic to apply for a Blue Badge permit? Tut, tut. The lengths some people will go to for unwarranted easy access parking privileges is astounding.



Surprise, surprise, that's not the last we've seen of Mr Big, who is actually quite ickle now we're face to face with the

supposedly legendary crime lord. Soon he re-enters his lair as a gargantuan, three-chinned, tongue-shooting decapitated head wearing a fedora, mounted on a Roomba robot vacuum cleaner. When dispatched for a second time he emits triangular shards of diamond or bone (or whatever they are) as in the diluted NES version, before losing all his facial flesh to reveal a skeleton skull beneath. I don't suppose it's bone then.

Still chomping away like an MDMA-addled stoner, he now appears to have been planted in a futuristic bowl of dog food. More shards of erm, wotsits, cascade in all directions when he's put down for a third time, and we're done and dusted. Job's a good'ne. All that remains is for us to pilfer - I mean *confiscate* and submit for evidence - his stash of gold and we're out of here.

Oh wait, according to the 'curtain call' salute, that was just a training mission and we should now get in touch with our local DEA office to sign up for the real thing. Well, I suppose with the creation of the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers still three years away we're going to be at a loose end anyway. What the heck, I used to watch The Bill so I'm sure it'll all work out OK. Count me in, Mr Sessions, sir. Which way to the samples room? I've got some, erm, *evidence* to submit.